The Builder.

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THE slowness with which we have arrived at a knowledge of any of the principles on which the architects of the middle ages worked, is very remarkable: our former blindness to what seems now so obvious that it could not be overlooked, is quite extraordinary, and our present blindness in other respects will be as strikingly apparent a few years hence. The belief that the Gothic architects recognized no rules, but worked merely for effect, was universal and unquestioned. "If we ask what they mean by pure Gothic," says Knight, in his 'Analytical Inquiry into the principles of Taste,' "we receive no satisfactory answer; there are no rules—no proportions—and consequently no definitions; but we are referred to models of generally acknowledged excellence," and even in stronger terms, accomplished professors of our day have spoken of the architectural productions of the middle ages as the result of caprice, simply and entirely. They saw reason to think differently of them, it is true, before the words were well out of their mouth, and at the present moment, the fact that they were erected on received principles, and according to set rules,—that caprice had no share in the general arrangement, and little, if any, even in the ornamentation of Gothic structures, is known to all who have inquired into the subject.

The similarity which buildings of the same period, and even of several periods, bear to each other, though long unrecognized, is extraordinary. The ancient parish churches of a county,—the parish churches of all England, we may say, are founded on the same type, and even where they differ, the reason is for the most part evident and explainable. The well developed chancel, growing out from the east end of the nave, sedilia and piscina on the south side of it, priest's door on the same side, a south porch at the west end of the nave, the font not far from it, buttresses to strengthen the walls at the points of thrust, a tower, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, follow as matters of course.

And yet they did not simply copy, at least in the best years of the art; they worked on the same principles, were similarly influenced by similar circumstances, looked to what had been done before, and the results were coincident, but always with a difference. They did sometimes copy: Dugdale, in his "Warwickshire," affords us an example at Coventry. He gives the "Indenture of Covenants" between the aldermen of that city and Thomas Phillips, freemason, and John Pettit, who agreed to build a cross there, *in all points like one in Abingdon*,* but during the best periods it was less trouble to them to compose than to copy. *Geometry was the foundation of their art*: a few simple rules of proportion, apparently of universal application, regulated all their designs; and without similar attention to proportions, whether attained by geometry or by numbers, modern architects cannot hope to produce satisfactory buildings. "There are two causes of beauty," says Wren, "natural and customary,—natural is from *geometry*, consisting in uniformity (that is, equality) and proportion. Customary beauty is begotten by the use of our senses to those objects which are usually pleasing to us for other causes; as familiarity or particular inclination breeds a love to things not in themselves lovely. Here lies the great occasion of errors; here is tried the architect's judgment; but always the true test is natural or geometrical beauty." And this the mediæval architects perfectly well understood, although if any man had ventured to say so when Wren wrote, he would have been adjudged mad,—Gothic architecture being understood, then, as having no other characteristics than disorder and negligence, caprice and confusion.

That they had a geometrical system, however, is evident, and many minds, as our readers know, have applied, and are now applying themselves to the discovery of its precise nature.

Cæsar Cæsarianus, an Italian architect, born about 1481 or 82, in a translation of Vitruvius, and a Commentary, which he published, now very scarce, introduced into it a scheme which he called "The plan of the foundation of a sacred building, with columns at a distance asunder, constructed after the German manner (*Germanico more*), by means of a triangle and square, like that which is now to be seen at Milan." The diagrams consist of a ground plan of Milan Cathedral, and various sectional and other views, shewing how the proportions were fixed by means of trinogles and other geometrical forms. Hawkins, in his "History of the Origin of Gothic Architecture," published in 1813, first made Cæsarianus generally known, and gives copies of the principal diagrams in question, from which, however very little can be gained.

This, with Kerrich's "Observations on the use of the *Vesica Piscis*, in the Architecture of the middle ages,"† has been the foundation of much that has been done since, and which we venture to think will shortly take a practical shape.‡ Our readers will remember Mr. Chantrell's paper on the subject, which appeared in our columns not long since,‡ wherein reference was made to a system proposed by Mr. John Browne, of York. This has brought us a long communication from that gentleman, complaining of misrepresentation, and claiming to be considered one of the earliest investigators of the subject, and the instructor of Mr. Chantrell. We have not space for the whole of the letter, but think it right to insert the following main portion of it:—

"It will not be deemed necessary that I should now shew for how long a period prior to 1828, I had studied and tried to apply the principle, as given by Cæsar Cæsarianus, or how long before the same year I had studied Mr. Kerrich's idea of the 'vesica piscis,' or had struggled to discover the principles that seemed to have more probably influenced the productions of the architects of the middle ages; or what was the result of the interview which I had with Mr. Kerrich, or that I should produce the correspondence which passed between us. Suffice it, therefore, that I give the following extract from one of his letters:—'I am clearly of opinion such discoveries,' as he understood mine to be, 'ought to be recorded, as they must lead to further, and, as I think, important knowledge.' But it is necessary to shew that, during the year 1828, I did present for the consideration of the Society of Antiquaries of London, an 'Essay on the Working Principles of Ecclesiastical Architecture,' consisting of about 150 folio pages of manuscript, accompanied by a large portfolio, containing at the least ninety-four mathematical draughts, illustrative of my opinions; the draughts consisting of various portions of structures, with referential explanations for a repetition of construction to any future scale. To this essay was not prefixed any such title as 'The Trinitarian System of Pointed or Christian Architecture,' as Mr. Chantrell has stated; and therefore he is inaccurate in saying that the society 'did not approve of its title.' The title was that given above in italics, and the subject occupied the attention of the society on two evenings, viz., the 11th and 18th of December, 1828 (see the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. II., 1828, page 553, where my name is by mistake printed *Byrne*, instead of Browne). There is, therefore, no ground for the insinuation that my communication was rejected.

From the year 1828, I have lost no real opportunity of testing the governing influence of my principles, whenever I could obtain a correct plan, elevation, or section of any edifice, and have always ended my labours with satisfactory conviction. But having, in 1837, commenced a series of drawings illustrative of the conventional ornaments in York Cathedral, and events subsequently occurring which drew upon me the heavy duty of extending those illustrations, and producing a new History of the Fabric from the original Registers of the See and of the Church of York, I was compelled to relinquish all consecutive study of the working principles of church architecture until that History should be completed, which is now on the eve of being accomplished, after twenty years of anxious labour and exertion.

During this delay of an exposition on my part of the working principles, my friend, Mr. Chantrell, has persevered in obtaining, both directly and indirectly, such hints from my working scheme as might answer his own purpose; and finding that more renown would accrue to himself from broaching something that might seem new, than following in the track which I had pointed out to him, he has adapted my proved results to his imaginary speculations, and given a diagram which, he states, shews the proceeding of my principles.

It is not requisite that I should here shew where and how I came to adopt such a singular and unique mode of testing the various productions of the architects of the middle ages. I have adopted it, and applied it always with apparent success; and have no doubt of its ever giving satisfaction to those who may undertake to test ancient ecclesiastical edifices thereby, providing they be tested on *accurate* drawings, or sections, of a scale *sufficiently large*, as most of the parts of those structures appear to have been designed of the working size.

The working principles which I apply to ecclesiastical buildings, are founded upon a creative scheme which is very different from the one given as mine in page 302. Mine really consists of a circle, four right angles, and three vesicas, to which I attach a scriptural meaning.*

A holy explanation of a mere geometrical scheme will probably startle the sensitive feelings of many, who are not in the least prepared either to believe, or can understand how such schemes could be made to affect masonic structures. But let it be remembered, that in ages of barbarism and war, common minds were little accustomed to reason about things generally; and consequently were not prepared to understand much of the indivisibility of the Great First Cause, nor how so many various operations should be ascribed to one only. Therefore the builders of sacred structures had recourse to symbolism and emblematic representations for explanation; and this manner undoubtedly pervaded all their proceedings and instructions. And is it too much to be believed in these days of scientific research, that the Christian architects, who had not only entered upon their career in infancy by the acknowledgment and profession of a Triune God, but had thus allowed that profession to guide all their spiritual concerns, did also allow the same religious creed to influence their exertions, especially when tending to the honour of their

* It was begun in 1441 and finished in 1444. It was 7 feet 8 inches square, 27 feet high, with eighteen niches filled with statues, mostly of kings. The founder of it was Sir William Hollies, Knight, sometime mayor of London, who left 200*l.* for the purpose. There was an old cross there previously, which was built in 1384.

* "Archæologia," Vol. XVIII., A.D. 1817.

† The analogy existing between architectural and musical proportions has also occupied much attention. Gevaert (Henri), a learned French ecclesiastic of the seventeenth century, wrote a work entitled "Architecture Harmonique; ou, Application de la Doctrine des Proportions de la Musique à l'Architecture." Paris, 1679, 4to. The geometrical relation of consonances was illustrated by Archimedes.

‡ See p. 301, ante.

* Mr. Browne has forwarded his scheme, and what he considers its symbolical meaning, but we are unable now to give them.

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